

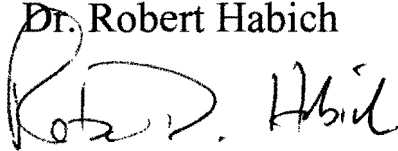
**A Life in Fiction: How Kate Chopin's Biography Changes How  
We Interpret Her Works**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Habich", written in a cursive style.

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## Abstract

Kate Chopin (1850 – 1904) is an author whose stories have been used in classrooms and anthologies for at least thirty years. She has become a highly influential feminist author, and her short stories and her novel *The Awakening* have met much criticism and interpretation. She has been credited by some with creating her stories and characters entirely by imagination. However, when compared to her biography, there are startling similarities, which lead me to believe that she relied on her life for inspiration for most of her works. This can potentially change how her works are interpreted by readers and critics. Also, some assumptions have been made about Chopin's life based on how *The Awakening* was received. It is important to correct these assumptions because they can change how we look at Chopin as a writer. In my essay, I compare critical articles with conclusion that I have drawn based on biographical information that I have compiled. I also use quotes from Chopin herself to prove that she was not as despondent as she is assumed to have been by some critics.

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Kate Chopin is considered to be an author ahead of her time. A popular reference like Wikipedia credits Chopin with being the forerunner of feminist authors, and an early academic critic, Fred Lewis Patee, said that Chopin “must be rated as genius, taut, vibrant, intense of soul.” She has always been credited with developing her characters with no inspiration from reality, and even though the settings of her stories are real locations, the way she describes them takes the reader to a place that in actuality does not exist, it is so dreamlike. She is considered a forerunner of feminist authors, and an advocate for female sexual freedom and independence.

However, her characters and stories were inspired by real people. In fact, Chopin drew from her life experiences, finding plots, characters, settings, and relationships that she included in her stories. Also, she took characters from people that she knew in her life, creating individual characters from a type of person that she would have known well.

There are some concrete parallels between Chopin’s biography and some of her more popular texts. There are some small glimmers of her life that exist in the texts, but when they are compiled together, the evidence is obvious. The connections are there – it is up to us to put them together accurately, without coming to inaccurate conclusions, which has happened in the past. So in addition to presenting this new perspective, there also needs to be some correction to some assumptions already made.

All of this is important because it changes how we look at Kate Chopin as an author. If she wrote from what she knew, she is no longer the “creative visionary” that she has been credited with being for all of these years. Chopin herself

recognized where she got her inspirations. Chopin's Shelfari.com author page states that she studied Guy de Maupassant, and that she admired his ability to put a life on the page.

*"...I read his stories and marveled at them. Here was life, not fiction; for where were the plots, the old fashioned mechanism and stage trapping that in a vague, unthinkable way I had fancied were essential to the art of story making."*

Chopin herself recognized the importance of putting life into a character, and how much more important it is to create the character than it is to put in highly structured plots. She knew that life was what produced such characters. She was able to perceive life and put it on the paper (Shelfari).

However, that doesn't change her integrity as an author, nor does that mean that she is less talented or important. There are assumptions that have been made about both Chopin's writing and about her personal life, and I think that it is important to get the clearest picture possible so we can fully appreciate her work. This is important for two reasons:

- When presented with the facts about her life, readers and critics must take a second look at Chopin's works, because there is clear evidence that she did use her personal experience to develop her writings.
- We must also use her biographical information to correct some misconceptions about her life after *The Awakening*.

## I.

Chopin wrote over one hundred narratives during her lifetime. Chopin's short stories are ideal examples of how Chopin used her life to create her stories. They are like little snippets of her life, with little twists and turns along the way. Some stories draw from her childhood; others come from situations that happened in her adult years. Sometimes, the critics do not make the connections between Chopin's life and her writings, so there are differing opinions on what her stories mean.

Many of her stories start off with a tragic or shocking event. In Chopin's short story, "The Story of an Hour," Brently Mallard's cause of "death" was a railroad disaster. Although this is only mentioned in the beginning of the story, I believe that the inspiration behind Mr. Mallard's cause of death can be found in Kate's childhood. However, that is not what the critics necessarily think. For example, Nicole Smith states that this short story is about the constraints of marriage and the result of a loveless and unhappy marriage. She says that the language comes alive when Mrs. Mallard goes upstairs and sits alone, and that the more colorful text is Chopin's way of driving this idea home. She also claims that inside Mrs. Mallard there is a wild woman waiting to be released. Smith says that Mrs. Mallard is the picture of politeness, and it is clear that she is a "perfect gentlewoman." The language of the text reveals the wild spirit that dwells within, and her husband's death releases the unruliness within.

However, I think that the language is colorful and vivid throughout the text. Due to the nature of the story, I think that the language only seems more vivid because her emotions are so. I have to disagree with Smith – I think that "The Story

of an Hour” is Chopin’s recollection of events that transpired when her father died, and I think that she drew inspiration from her mother for the character Mrs. Mallard.

Chopin’s childhood was marked with tragedy. At the age of five, Kate’s father, Thomas O’Flaherty, was killed in a railroad disaster just outside of St. Louis. The entire family was there that day to see him off. There had been 125 miles of recently completed railroad tracks connecting St. Louis with the state capital. A special locomotive was commissioned to carry the more prominent members of the local society on the maiden voyage, and Thomas O’Flaherty was at the top of the list. As they approached the newly completed bridge over the Gasconade River, the bridge failed, sending all occupants of the first few train cars to their death. As word came in back home, the O’Flaherty family was devastated. This event marked the end of Kate’s happy childhood, as the next few years would be marked with more tragedy (Eliot 4-5).

This event greatly influenced “The Story of an Hour.” In the opening, we learn of Brently’s death in a railroad disaster, with his name leading the list of the dead. We also know that it has been checked twice. Although it is not specifically mentioned, it is implied that Brently is a prominent member of society, perhaps similar in stature to Chopin’s father. It would be easy to picture the disaster in the story the same as it happened to Thomas O’Flaherty. Specific details of the accident are not given at any time in the story. Perhaps this is because it would have come devastatingly close to reality for Chopin.

The devastation over Brently's death in the Mallard family is clear – great care is taken in breaking the news to Mrs. Mallard, because it is obvious that Mrs. Mallard loved her husband in some way.

*"She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead."*

At the same time, Mrs. Mallard did show some mixed feelings about her husband.

*"And yet she had loved him--sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter!"*

While the cause of death in the story is similar to reality, little is known about Chopin's family life before Thomas's death, so other connections become unclear. It is known that Kate's mother, Eliza Faris, was Thomas's second wife. He was widowed at the age of thirty-nine when his first wife died of an unknown illness. Little evidence of their relationship has survived, so the few clues that we do have come from letters that have lasted through the years. In the story "Athenaise," a couple is described that some scholars believe mirrors Chopin's parents. If this is true, we know that both parents were fiercely passionate, first for life, then for each other. If we are to take this description to heart, then it is possible that Eliza was not happy in the first few years of marriage. In "Athenaise," the young bride runs away multiple times. Ultimately, what brings her back for good is the child that she discovers she is carrying while she is away.



If this description of Chopin's parents is to be believed, then perhaps Mrs. Mallard could be based on Chopin's mother, at least at a later point in life. Perhaps this is Chopin's rendering of what she believes her mother truly felt. While there was love and passion between Thomas and Eliza, there is just as much evidence to support the idea that Eliza would have felt some degree of relief once Thomas was gone. She would not have expressed it as openly as Mrs. Mallard did. In fact, the O'Flaherties spent a year in mourning for Thomas. But if the young bride in "Athenaise" was indeed Eliza, then it is not difficult to find her in Mrs. Mallard as well, because it is quite possible that those feelings would have stayed in some capacity over the years, even if Eliza did grow to love Thomas (Eliot 3).

"The Story of an Hour" has been used in schools for many years. There has been some student discussion on this particular short story. A student at Milford High School makes the argument that there was no love between Mrs. Mallard and her husband. I think that Chopin makes it quite clear that there is love there. Mrs. Mallard clearly appreciates the affection that he showed her, and while she may have not loved him more often than she did, that does not mean that there was not some kind of deep friendship there, which in itself is a kind of love. The student even goes as far as to say that since there are no children mentioned, there was probably no sexual relationship between them. Once again, I see no evidence for this. Just because no children were mentioned does not mean that there are none. Chopin sets the scene without going into background information in this story. If the children were out of the house, they would not have been mentioned, because they would not have impacted the story line.

Not every critic denies that Chopin used her own life for inspiration. There are some critics that recognize that Chopin drew from her biography. Emily Toth makes some startling connections between "The Story of an Hour" and Chopin's biography. These connections further strengthen the theory that Mrs. Mallard's character was built based on Chopin's mother, Eliza. In fact, Mrs. Mallard's first name, Louise, can be connected to the story. Eliza came from French speaking relatives. Her name would have been pronounced "Eleeza" by them – which can sound a lot like Louise to a young child. Mrs. Mallard's sister is named Josephine – as is Eliza's sister. Brently Mallard's name is also connected with Chopin's past. In the railroad disaster, there were two men who were erroneously reported dead. Their names were Bryan and Moore. Toth believes that Chopin used the initials B and M to reference these two men. Brently's return in the end seems to be an incarnation of the two men, with the story showing what the consequence can be when matters of the dead are mistaken (Toth 33).

Toth may embrace the fact that Chopin drew from her life for inspiration, but most critics do not recognize the connections. There are other critical opinions of Chopin that take different approaches. Another set of conclusions comes from a critic named Daniel Deneau. In his essay, "Chopin's Story of an Hour," Deneau argues that the joy that Mrs. Mallard feels is sexual in nature. He references the use of the verb "possess" within the text. He suggests that the joy that she is feeling results in a sexual encounter, even though she is completely alone in the room after hearing the news. It would be almost supernatural in form. To suggest that the joy she feels results in a sexual excitement is stretching it too far in my opinion, especially if one

concedes that Louise and Eliza are interconnected in even the most basic form. Since there are such similarities between Mrs. Mallard and Eliza, to say that Chopin wrote about her mother feeling sexual excitement upon the news of her father's death does not make much sense, because it is unlikely that Chopin would have written such a thing about her own mother. The vivid language does produce a certain excitement in this part of the text, but to associate it with a sexual tone is inaccurate in my opinion. Since there is evidence that Chopin used her mother as a template for Mrs. Mallard, by asserting that Mrs. Mallard has a sexual experience as a result of Brently's death makes the entire scenario seem odd, in my opinion.

In this story, there are clearly multiple connections between biography and the text, but there is another than can be applied. The Creole culture was very important to Chopin, and there are many Creole references in her stories. Creole women have been known to be storytellers for a long time. There is one Creole folktale that has some striking similarities to "The Story of an Hour." In the Creole tale, a woman is abused and terrorized by her husband. She is beaten down mentally to the point of complete submission. Upon his sudden death, the woman sobs "with only half of her soul. In the other half the sob wavered into a sigh of relief" (Toth 252). The idea of a woman being liberated by the sudden death of her husband was one that Chopin had been exposed to multiple times before she sat down to write "The Story of an Hour." Perhaps it is possible that Chopin took a situation that she felt close to, and weaved it in with a tale that had already been conceived, at least on some level. This could possibly explain why this short story was so well received, because it was a new version of an old tale.

Chopin had strong ties to the Creole world. Her mother came from an aristocratic Creole family, and Oscar Chopin was Creole himself. While she lived in Cloutierville, she was involved in the Creole upper class society, as well as the lower class social circles as well. Chopin had many groups of friends from many different backgrounds, but most all of them were Creole to some degree (Inge). Toth mentions that the Creole story that Chopin likely drew from was a popular story during Chopin's time. It is a story that many people would have known and told to others. Since Chopin was so immersed in the Creole culture, especially during her writing years, I believe that it is safe to say that Chopin would have been familiar with this tale. Furthermore, if she was familiar with it, then I do not think that it is an accident that there are such similarities between "The Story of an Hour" and the folktale.

One other important item to further link Chopin to the Creole world is the fact that the Creole culture has embraced her so much. In fact, the creoles page at [everyculture.com](http://everyculture.com) mentions Chopin as one of the primary Creole authors of all time. Only one other author is mentioned, but Chopin is clearly the star in the Creole literary world. Obviously they see a strong connection with her, which might be because she is retelling their stories to others, even if it is in different forms.

It is interesting that for so many years, "Desirée's Baby" was the short story that Kate Chopin was known for, according to the Kate Chopin International Society. *The Awakening* was condemned for years for being too explicit, and her other short stories were almost lost to time until they were republished in the 1970s (Chopin

International Society). However, “Desirée’s Baby” withstood the test of time for years.

The main character, Desirée, has been analyzed by many different critics. J. Tyler Davis focuses on Desirée’s character as a woman. He makes her out to be meek and mild, irreparably broken by Armand’s abandonment. He claims that she has no rebuttal when Armand claims that she is not white because she does not know that fact for sure. This is true. Desirée’s origins are unknown because she is found as an abandoned baby. However, Desirée’s lack of rebuttal is more likely a reflection of what a woman’s place would have been at the time. After all, in Chopin’s time, women did not have the rights and freedoms that are enjoyed today. It is probable that Chopin wrote Desirée this way because this is how a good, respectful woman would have responded. Once again, I believe that she borrowed from what she knew, and this time, she is telling a story about what an honorable woman would do if presented with this situation. She would leave quietly and with dignity, without rebutting or arguing the finer points.

Despite the fact that Armand abandons Desirée at the end, this story keeps a conservative view on pregnancy, much like “Athenaise.” By a conservative view, I mean that Chopin does not condone pregnancy without marriage. She also emphasizes the power of a pregnancy bringing a marriage together. To Chopin, a pregnancy should be embraced by a married couple as a team, not as single parents. Chopin did not hold sex to the same standards as pregnancy. In her stories, sex is not necessarily monogamous, like in *The Awakening*. Edna has multiple partners in this text, but there is no implication that she is considered to be immoral. She is with

Arobin while still married to her husband, and carries on an emotional affair with Robert that does not turn physical because there is no opportunity. However, there are no children born outside of a marriage. If Edna is pregnant in the end of *The Awakening*, which has been widely speculated, it would further prove the point that Chopin held conservative beliefs about pregnancy, because Edna commits suicide. She does not carry the child to term, nor does she choose to answer to anyone about who the father would be, because the answer would not have been socially acceptable to her circle of friends. The child in question would not have been her husband's, so Chopin presents her with no other options other than suicide.

In "Desirée's Baby," the child was conceived in a stable marriage, unlike *The Awakening*. The child is with the mother at all times throughout the story, keeping with contemporary views at the time that the mother should be there to nurture the child. These are views that Chopin would have been raised with, and they are rules that she lived by herself. Kate was an attentive mother when her children were young, despite the fact that it was clear that by her fourth child, she was tired (Eliot 40).

It is interesting, though, that Armand's dark side is born from the death of his mother when he was eight years old, which is around the same age that Chopin was when her father died. The death of a parent seems to be a popular theme with Chopin, since she has used it as a basis for two of her more well-received short stories. Only this time, it is the mother who dies, leaving behind a son and a father, which is the inverse of the actual situation. Even so, I believe that Chopin is exploring the possibility of what might have happened if her father's death had the

opposite effect than what it did. Clearly, Chopin did not grow up to be spiteful or racist. However, the loss of his mother at such a young age pushes Armand into a dark stupor, which ultimately pushes away the next mother that he knows – the mother of his own child, Desirée. What Chopin may be saying here is that if a death pushes someone into a depression, then they could wind up repeating the actions that put them there in the first place. In the end, Armand ends up alone again, just as he was when he was a child without his mother.

Kate Chopin's conservative view on pregnancy in her writings could not be more different than her more liberal views on female sexuality or her opinion on female freedom. As described in "Athenaise" and "Desirée's Baby," Chopin's opinion on pregnancy is rather conservative, which is interesting since she used pregnancy in so many of her stories. It seems to be a common thread among many of them, and it is important to note the different ways in which it is used. In "Athenaise," Chopin is not only commenting on pregnancy again, but also the contrast between her opinion on pregnancy and her views on female sexuality and how both of these change when presented with her biography.

In her short story "Athenaise," Chopin uses pregnancy as a binder in the relationship between the main character and her husband. Until she discovers that she is carrying a child, she bounces back and forth between her home with her husband and the home she grew up in. Once she does find out that she is pregnant, she goes home and decides that she wants to stay there (Chopin).

As I stated before, it is entirely possible that the couple in this story could have been modeled after the O'Flaherties. Kate's mother was young, and her father had

already been married once before, so he was more than ten years older than Eliza, just like in the story. While it is known that there was passion between them, it is not necessarily clear when those feelings would have developed (Eliot 3). Before conceiving, Eliza may have felt some apprehension about her marriage. Later on in life, she may have confided these feelings to Kate, which might have led to the inspiration for this story. If there was any kind of apprehension or disdain in the marriage in the beginning that “Athenaise” inspired, then it would lend more support to the argument that Mrs. Mallard is also inspired by Kate’s mother.

A common theme in Chopin’s stories is female sexuality. Chopin tends to have a liberal opinion on sexuality, especially for her time. Therefore, it is interesting to see her take such a conservative stance on motherhood, since they aren’t exactly opposite sides of the coin. If the reader had perused some of her other texts first, they might be surprised at the end of this story. Compared to something like *The Awakening*, “Athenaise” concludes with an intact family and a woman returning to her husband after a taste of freedom. But a reader who knows Chopin would realize that while it is clear that she does have a conservative view on pregnancy, she is also commenting on the female spirit once again. As Catherine Morgan-Proux states, Athenaise’s renouncement of her childhood comes only as a result of a pregnancy, so her growth as a woman is “questionable.” In Chopin’s life, we know that her mother was a passionate, spirited woman. If Athenaise is modeled after her mother at all, then Chopin is saying that she did not approve of her mother’s own transition into motherhood. Since Chopin entered into her marriage with Oscar with love, then she could be comparing and contrasting her own transition to her mother’s, with



“Athenaise” being the commentary on what her mother’s transition was lacking, since her mother’s marriage was not based on love, but on an arrangement.

## II

There is no story that addresses the female spirit more than *The Awakening*. One of the most important themes in this particular story is how women interact with each other. Despite some conflicting interpretations and misunderstandings, it is important to note just how much of the text was inspired by Chopin’s life and experiences, and it is interesting to see how this potentially changes how the text is viewed and interpreted.

No text by Chopin has been as misinterpreted and speculated about as *The Awakening* has. Opinions have differed for years, and many scholars have fought to a stalemate about meanings, symbolism, and origins. Sean Heuston writes that Edna exhibits psychological problems throughout the text, and that even if she does not realize it, she wants to die at the end. Carole Stone says that *The Awakening* is about questioning the idea that motherhood brings joy to women and that child care is a woman’s principal vocation. Yet another author, Douglas Radcliffe-Umstead, claims that the text uses nature to advance the major themes and characterizations. But to credit Chopin with creating the entire text without concrete inspiration ignores some important facts. There are significant similarities to Chopin’s life in *The Awakening*. However, people often make mistaken assumptions about Chopin’s life based on this particular text.

In *The Awakening*, it is impossible to ignore the fact that half of the characters are women. Furthermore, they are all very different women. While there are many

reasons why Chopin uses female characters and relationships to tell this story, I believe that she is using examples of women that she knew well and she is blending them together to create a woven, complete story about the feminine spirit.

Some critics have recognized the relationships among the women in this story. Kathleen Streater claims that each woman is an example of a different type of feminism. Adele Ratignolle is the “mother-woman,” tending after her family and focusing on her children. Edna is the restless spirit, not bound by her children and devoted to staying true to herself. Streater recognizes that each woman is bringing something else to the table. To focus on one or to dismiss one’s example of femininity is to cheat the other of what she is. The women need each other to contrast against each other. Alone, each woman would be a complete character, but when presented together, they represent complete womanhood. Also, Streater points out that despite what some teachers and critics have tried to say, at the root there a sense of power with Adele, not the inherent weakness that has been attributed to her. Adele finds power in the patriarchal system of the time, and she uses it to her advantage.

There are other ways that the female characters add to the integrity of the novel. A. Elizabeth Elz has another insight on how the women work together in the story. She claims that these women offer a commentary on the communication (or lack thereof) between these women. Elz implies that Edna is ultimately a failure because she fails to communicate with Adele woman to woman. Ultimately, Edna must appease Adele in the motherly sense, and the communication between them is lost and dead because they are essentially speaking different languages. They are on complete opposite ends of the spectrum of womanhood, so their communication is

ineffective because they have such differing priorities. Adele is speaking as an “Alpha Mother,” while Edna is more like an “Anti Mother” (Elz 19)

Both of these critics point out the great contrasts between Edna and Adele, which are very apparent throughout the text. However, I do not think that the women in *The Awakening* are illustrating feminism or a special lack of communication. Rather, I think that Chopin is simply compiling a sampling of the different varieties of women that she had known throughout her life. Chopin used these specific women because they compliment each other so well. Each one represents a part of femininity, and together they create the entire portrait. Mademoiselle Reisz presents the independent single woman who chooses to forgo motherhood. Adele forgoes her freedom for her family while remaining a sensual and smart woman. Each is happy in her situation, and each is beautiful in her own way. Edna is not as beautiful as Adele, but she has more spirit. She attempts to find a balance between the other two women. Edna is a mother, but she wants the independence and artistic freedom that Mademoiselle Reisz enjoys as well. She does not find the balance in the end, but she represents even more femininity – choice, determination, and restlessness. These women were not picked at random, because they make a complete picture.

When Chopin wrote *The Awakening*, she would have been in her forties, just returned from a trip to New Orleans, newly settled into her home in St. Louis again. This trip had been cut short for reasons unknown to scholars at this time. What is known is that she left in a hurry (Toth 333). The women in this text seem to be a cross section of the women in Creole culture, with some combining and criss-crossing, of course. Adele is a fine sample of the mother figure – the critics agree

with that. But Adele is also clearly the head of the family, steering her children where they need to go with determinate force. She also knows how to use drama to her advantage. At one point, when Adele, Robert, and Edna are alone together, Adele feigns weakness, forcing the group to break up (Chopin 54). Edna suspects that it was all a ruse, because Adele's health gives no hints of weakness or illness otherwise, much to her chagrin. Clearly, this woman is not the meek and mild mother readers love to relegate her to. Instead, she is a woman who chooses to be a mother because she wants to be, but she does not forfeit her power as a woman in the process. Even though Adele's character is made clear in the text, some reviews at the time chose to ignore Adele's influence on the Edna. St. Louis's first review of *The Awakening* appeared in the April 30, 1899 edition of *Republic*. To put it lightly, the review was not forgiving of the text. All it did was summarize the text incorrectly and make incorrect conclusions based on gaping plot holes that were created by the summary, not by the story. However, it is important to note that in the review, there is little mention of Adele Ratignolle, and there is absolutely no mention of the fact that she was in an advanced state of pregnancy. In fact, Chopin's writing about a pregnant woman was taboo for the time – pregnancy was rarely described in literature, and women were typically kept inside once they reached the last trimester (Toth 332). Chopin herself would have been sequestered in a similar manner during her pregnancies, so it is possible that she drew from her own experiences with Adele's character. However, the review does mention Adele's exquisite beauty and her role as a mother-woman in the plot – completely excluding the important points in Adele's

character and her contributions as a character to the story. It totally ignores Edna as the most important character in the story.

Edna, in contrast, seems to have lost some power as a woman. She is set adrift by her awakening – she is unsatisfied with her current situation, eventually leaving her husband's home to live alone and beginning not one, but two affairs. Her children give her no meaning in life. Her life ends alone, in the ocean, without her children, her husband, or her lovers. Meanwhile, Adele remains at home, fulfilled by the birth of her newest child and in sharing it with her husband. I believe that Edna is not the powerful feminist example that she has been made out to be. Rather, I think that she is an example of a lost and unsure woman, possibly similar to someone that Chopin had known in her life, or maybe even Chopin herself.

After Oscar Chopin's death, it has been speculated that Chopin engaged in an affair with a married man. His relationship status has been debated – Per Seyersted does not mention a marriage, while Wikipedia claims Kate was almost a home wrecker – and there is little concrete evidence of the true nature of the affair. However, it is known that Chopin did have some kind of a relationship with this mystery man, and it is known that it ended quickly and abruptly. If it was indeed a sexual affair, Chopin could have been drawing from personal experience. At the end of the text, Edna is reeling from Robert's abandonment, which leads her to the ocean to commit suicide. While Chopin never took such drastic measures, it is possible that she herself was reeling from a rejection as well.

Much has been made about the "lady in black" who appears throughout the text. She always appears trailing a pair of lovers, and she is described as an older

woman, dressed in head-to-toe black, carrying prayer beads around while apparently engaging in silent prayer. Joseph Church and Christa Havener argue that the lady in black is a reflection of Chopin herself. They claim that she illustrates Chopin's interest in a conundrum – "the impossible simultaneous requirement for defining identity and freedom from definition." She is supposedly exploring the idea of this woman being a contradiction. They claim that Chopin herself was experiencing this predicament. However, I think that this assessment of the lady in black is misguided. I think that the lady in black is simply another example of a feminine character. In comparison to Edna's inability to settle and Adele's motherly but sexual figure, the lady in black adds a type of balance to the feminine examples. She adds a type of wisdom that is lacking in the others that is shown in how she keeps a watchful and protective eye on the lovers, and she is also an older figure compared to the rest, even older than Mademoiselle Riesz. I think that the lady in black may have been inspired by Chopin's great grandmother. She came to live with the O'Flaherty family when Chopin's father died, and while the family was in mourning, she was the conservative, older feminine influence on the family. She took on Kate's education for a number of months, and she was a strict, yet guiding, influence (Seyersted 55). It is not difficult to imagine the lady in black in the same light – after all, she is described similarly to a nun, and if it suits the story, is it a stretch to imagine Chopin using stereotypes to assert the lady in black's character? It appears that the image and idea of the lady in black is an example of a woman like Chopin's great grandmother.

### III.

One interesting result of the aftermath of *The Awakening* is how it changed Chopin's image as an author. Some readers look too far into the text for clues into Chopin's life, making incorrect assumptions and missing the real clues. Chopin's image was also changed because of her perceived reaction to the novel's reviews, even though those assumptions are often incorrect as well.

Some critics try to assert that Chopin was in an unhappy marriage because of the plot of *The Awakening*. Since Chopin has used so much of her own life as inspiration for her short stories, many assume that she did the same thing for this text as well. However, there is no proof that she was unhappy with Oscar Chopin. On the contrary, evidence is abundant in favor of a fulfilled and happy marriage between the two. Upon Oscar's death, Chopin spent upwards of a year in mourning, and she never married again (Toth 145). So if Edna and Leonce's relationship was not born from Kate and Oscar's, where did Chopin's inspiration come from?

Emily Toth speculates that it could have come from a scandal in St. Louis that was taking place when Chopin would have been writing *The Awakening*. At one resort, there was a tale about an elderly woman who was staying there for the summer. Despite her age, she was very good looking and youthful. She was also married. She met a young man who loved poetry and spoke of romantic whims. Guests were amused until she became far more smitten than she should have. He left for New York without her, and she telegraphed him every day. Upon his return, she presented him with a diamond pin fashioned from her ring – she all but kissed him right in front of the other guests. When the gossip got back to him, the young man's

father came and took him away. The woman's husband fought with her when she would not stop her mourning – throwing out words like “silly love letters,” and “asylum” during an argument that took place in plain view of the other resort guests – much to their gossiping delight.

There has been speculation as to how the criticism of *The Awakening* impacted Chopin in the months and years after its publication. Chopin's critics were plentiful, and most of them had very strong and negative opinions. It would be easy to speculate that Chopin became discouraged at all of the negative press about her second novel. Some critics have created an image of a woman destroyed by the failure of this novel, which is not accurate.

Chopin has been given the reputation of an author who cannot handle rejection ever since her death five years after the release of *The Awakening*. Stormy Stipe says that Chopin was ostracized by her social circles after the novel's failure, and he points out that the local library refused to put the book on its shelves. Chopin died five years after the book's release – and Stipe claims that it was because she could not handle the extreme rejection and all of the negative press.

In fact, *The Awakening* was not her first experience with rejection. Jennifer Hicks points out that “The Story of an Hour” was published many years after it was written. She had experienced difficulty getting some of her short stories published because of the strong female characters and the emphasis on female sexual freedom. Such topics were a bit taboo, and they were not received well when presented for publication. Since it took a long time for “The Story of an Hour” to find a publisher, Hicks concludes that Chopin faced rejection throughout her entire writing career.



All of the rejection that Chopin faced did not seem to dampen her spirits. In fact, Chopin seemed to have fun with some of the negative press that she drew from the release of *The Awakening*. Chopin was not discouraged or sulky about the negative press, and the misconception about her response to the press has led to some false assumptions through the years about how she coped in the aftermath of *The Awakening*. She wrote the following note in response to her critics, which was published in *Book News*:

*"Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a think [sic] I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late. (Toth)"*

This hardly paints the picture of an author in shambles, which is the reputation that Chopin was handed after *The Awakening*. She was likely given this status over the years, because there is far more criticism than there are responses from Chopin herself. In addition, her children noted years later that Chopin never discussed the negative press with them. This story illustrates Chopin's sense of humor.

Obviously, the story was not created by accident, and Chopin would have never have omitted Edna, even if she did know what she was "up to" right from the start. If this quote was well known, Chopin's image might be different, because it shows Chopin's sarcasm and her ability to poke fun at herself. *The Awakening* was a deliberate compilation of characters, with a realistic and vivid plot.

#### IV.

When presented with her biographical information, some popular ideas about Kate Chopin deserve to be reevaluated. Wikipedia calls Chopin a forerunner of twentieth century feminist authors. She is also categorized by [katechopin.org](http://katechopin.org) as being a romantic author because she read Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. She is definitely a feminist author – but she did not impact the early feminists as much as some would like to give her credit for. Also, since her biographical information is so intertwined with her works, I think that Chopin is a realist author – which would put her in the same category as her peers.

One misconception that can be corrected as a result of recognizing Chopin for what she was is that she influenced the feminists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since we now know that *The Awakening* was met with resistance and that her short stories had trouble finding publishers, it would be safe to say that Chopin's work was not as widely distributed during her time as it is now. In fact, according to the Kate Chopin International Society, it was not until the 1970s that her works began to find readers in large quantities, with the exception of "Desirée's Baby" and a few other short stories. Most early feminists would not have read Chopin, because it would not have been widely available to them. She does write about feminist themes, and some of her ideas were revolutionary. But to credit her with influencing early feminists is an overstatement.

Since so little was known about Chopin until recently, there have not been many critics to make the connection between her life and her stories, although there have been a few. Now, more and more information is being presented, and there are

more parallels to be found. Clearly, Chopin drew from what she knew for inspiration, and she wrote about characters and settings that she was familiar with. This places her firmly into the category of realist author – which is a change from the romantic connotation that she has been labeled with. She depicted life “as it was,” and she assessed the situations in terms of truth to reality (Oxford).

As a reader, when looking at her literature alone, Chopin’s works can be viewed as stories with heavy feminist themes, with strong, well rounded characters that complement each other, and settings that are clear and well described. But when we remember her biography while reading, suddenly her stories take on more life than before. Some characters are clearly based on her family members. Some of her stories are reflections on dramatic events in her life. But in the end, all of them offer some kind of a glimpse into Chopin’s life. What happened in reality was written about in fiction, and it is up to the reader to finally make the connections and recognize Chopin for what she has been all along – a realist writer who wrote about what she knew and shaped it into highly respected stories.

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